

Migrants, the inhuman conditions in Greece in the middle of a pandemic. “They told us: if the virus arrives here, we will dig a pit to bury you”

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In the Greek camps around 38,000 migrants live in desperate conditions, in spaces built to house less than 6,200. The report of Oxfam and the Greek Council for Refugees tells the story of those who are trapped there, subject to the arbitrary detention and refoulement by the authorities, and where more and more women suffer abuse and sexual assault.

Rawan arrived in Greece from Afghanistan on her own, with her two children. A victim of sexual violence, she had to live in a tent for six months in the overcrowded camp “Moria,” on Lesbos island, where there are not even any bathrooms. Here they live alongside 15,000 hopeless people, exposed to infection with COVID-19, in a space designed for 2,800 people, without water to wash their hands nor the opportunity to social distance. Midway through June, around 229 unaccompanied migrant children were detained in Greece, while in all the hot spots on the islands around 38,000 migrants are found in inhuman conditions in the middle of a pandemic, in a space built to house less than 6,200. The story of Rawan (a pseudonym) is told in the report diffused by Oxfam and the Greek Council for Refugees, that photographs the effects of the reform of Greece’s asylum system, approved on the first of January 2020, and partially modified in May. Both organizations denounce that, due to arbitrary detention and refoulement on the part of the authorities, “the abuse and sexual harassment of defenseless women is increasing during the lock down,” and are appealing to the European Union and Greece for the cancellation of the rules currently in place.

The shame at the heart of Europe – Rawan herself describes the living conditions in Moria. “The situation in the camp was already appalling,” they recount, “but with the pandemic it has gotten worse. They told us: ‘if the virus arrives here, they will dig a giant pit to bury us in.’” And the risk exists: “They gave us two masks and a piece of soap, but we don’t know what that will do for us since there is no water. At mealtimes there were so many people that it was impossible to social distance.” That sexual assaults have increased is also confirmed by Barlin, who, in order to travel from Greece to Somalia, had to confront a dangerous journey between life and death. She arrived on the island of Lesbos in 2019 and was assigned to the section for single woman in Moria. She spoke about a group of women who live in an olive grove outside the camp. In the middle of a pandemic, at night they do not even have access to hygienic services or bathrooms, and they have had to defend themselves, given that there are no police or any type of protection. “I remember one night when some men started to threaten them,” she recounts, “they went into their tents and took their cell phones. Many girls here have to deal with fear and frequent panic attacks.” Also living in the olive grove, is Jamal.

Arriving from Afghanistan when he was 16 years old, he was incorrectly registered as an adult and was put in a tent with a dozen adult men he did not know. Various bureaucratic vicissitudes still have not resolved his situation.

The Normal Procedure: Pregnant women and children detained in the camp – In reality, men, women, and children fleeing violence and persecution in countries like Syria and Afghanistan, have little chance at fair procedures to obtain international protection. All this with a little more than 10,000 arrivals in 2020 (in 2019 there were over 74,000). When they arrive in the island's hotspots, migrants (many of whom are in conditions of particular vulnerability, like children, pregnant women, and those with disabilities), are put into detention without access to health care, nor any other kind of protection. The system makes examining the causes that push asylum seekers from their countries of origin, which often include war and persecution, very difficult.

There is only one lawyer for asylum requests on Lesbos – The reform effectively prevents many asylum seekers from appealing if their application is rejected. The appeal, in fact, can only be presented through a lawyer, and there is only one on Lesbos. The story of Ali and his wife Karima (Syrian citizens), who arrived in Moria in November 2019, is emblematic. They had their first registration interview in 2020, and another is set for the tenth of May 2021. The couple has asked if, with the assistance of a lawyer, it would be possible to bring forward the date, but the response was negative. During their stay, moreover, Karima fell off a bridge in the slums of Moria, causing a miscarriage. Now she is pregnant again, but she was never seen by a doctor.

The faults of the Asylum System – “When Greek authorities reject an asylum request, that doesn't mean people don't need international protection,” explains Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou, policy advisor of the GRC, “but it's a consequence of the accelerated process of asylum applied at this moment at the borders, with very short deadlines that don't do anything but multiply the errors. This in a context that doesn't give many either the time or the means to prepare themselves for the assessment interview, which will make them relive the past horrors from which they've fled.” A system that has as a consequence the immediate detention of those whose asylum requests are refused, and their successive deportation to Turkey or their country of origin. A rule that applies, however, only to those who arrived at the beginning of 2020. Those that arrived in 2019 (because of the new arrivals, the old procedures are put off), will have to wait months, if not years, for the first interview. Months and years in which they remained trapped in the inhuman conditions of camps like Moria, “with the approval of the European Union, exposed to sexual assault and abuse, especially single women.”

The appeal – “This reform is a slap in the face of the humanitarian duty of Europe to protect those that flee war and persecution,” comments Riccardo Sansone, the head of the humanitarian office of Oxfam Italia. According to him, “the European Union is an

accomplice to this abuse as it has used Greece for years to experiment with new policies on migration. We are deeply worried that the Greek asylum system could become the inspiration for the future European reform.” Facing this situation, the organizations ask that the “Greek government and European Commission immediately revise the current rules, in a way that will not be damaging to human rights, nor in contrast with EU law. A situation that cannot be resolved, warn Oxfam and GRC, without a sharing of responsibility at the European level. “The policy of externalization of control of the common border,” concludes Sansone, “realized in this case with Turkey, and in a similar way with Libya to repel the flow along the central Mediterranean route, is demonstrably bankrupt, and has put millions of lives at risk, besides exposing them to unspeakable horrors.”